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7 surprising ways porn is changing

The industry is shifting in interesting ways

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Users of Internet pornography are probably familiar with the site YouPorn. And maybe RedTube. There's also Tube8, XTube, ExtremeTube, and PornHub. The list goes on. These sites, often referred to as the "tube sites," host a wide array of free (and largely pirated) user-generated content that's starting to change the porn industry. Listed below are seven of the most surprising ways porn is changing.

1. There's a lot less content.

Industry insiders will confirm that porn production is at an all-time low. Colin and Angie Rowntree have been in the porn business for over 20 years. Back in 1994, the AVN Hall of Fame inductees founded the BDSM website Wasteland.com. In 1999, Angie started Sssh.com, a porn site "for women, by women." Colin estimates that at least 50% of the small studios have gone under in the past 10 years. Angie told me over the phone, "A lot of the little tiny mom-and-pop ones are gone, and those were the ones that had original ideas."

Colin added, "If you want to get new content, quality content that's actually well made, somebody has to pay the performers. Somebody has to pay the cameraman. Somebody has to pay the editors. Somebody has to pay for all this stuff. And if nobody is paying to buy it, the whole thing comes tumbling down — which it currently is."

The duo has mapped out a little blurb that appears at the end of each of their films, reading, "Piracy is not a victimless crime. Please be respectful of the people who have shared a very intimate part of themselves with you, the crew that helped bring it to life, the editor who put it all together and the studio who paid for this production and gave everyone a safe, respectful and fun place to work. After all, would you work for free?"

2. Porn stars are picking up gigs on the side.

Porn isn't as lucrative an industry as it once was. And that fact is starting to work its way into performer's paychecks. "Performer payment rates have dropped, my guess would be, 35-40% over the last 10 years," Colin says.

It's not uncommon for aspiring actors to pick up gigs on the side. Aspiring porn actors are no different. As production continues to slow, well-paid positions are getting harder to come by, and performers are looking elsewhere for extra cash. Personal appearances are one option. Social media outreach is another. But these endeavors are usually reserved for more established stars. The rest fall back on other forms of business.

Rowntree told me, "The really unfortunate, unintended consequence for performers is that a lot of them are also escorting on the side now. Which I have no problem with. But escorting is different than being a porn star. Escorting has got certain protocols, requires a certain amount of street sense."

"You know, Suzy from Nebraska who goes to L.A. to be a porn star starts turning tricks in a motel room without any backup security and things like that, it's just a disaster waiting to happen."

3. Age verifications are becoming harder to track.

The "2257 Regulations" refers to an FBI program that requires porn producers to verify the age of their performers. As it states on the FBI website, "Section 2257 was

enacted to require producers of sexually explicit matter to maintain certain records concerning the identity and age of performers to assist in monitoring the industry. The identity of every performer is critical to determining and ensuring that no performer is a minor."

But as Rowntree explained, pirating content breaks that chain of information. He said, "There's absolutely no way to backtrack it. It just becomes lost. So it opens itself us to underage performers in sex movies on free tubes becoming accessible so anybody. And I've got a real problem with that."

It's not great news for those on the other side of the screen, either. Most tube sites don't have any age verification program in place. Rowntree said, "Any 12-year-old, without even clicking a button that says 'Yes I am over 18,' can get in there and see more hardcore porn than you could ever imagine."

4. Catering to the niches pays off.

Transformers 5 is currently in the works. While it probably won't be so different than the previous four movies, one thing is for sure: it's going to make a lot of money. As Angie Rowntree noted, Hollywood has found the perfect formula. Porn isn't so different. The big-busted blondes, the well-endowed hunks who so often appear in porn are all over the tubes. The scenes are formulaic and unoriginal, but also widely popular and profitable.

In regards to this kind of "vanilla porn," Colin Rowntree says, "There's just so much out there. It's so oversaturated between the tubes and all of the various remaining paid sites. It's just a fool's errand to try to produce that stuff unless you're some huge distribution company."

He added, "Specific niches, like BDSM and porn for women, are really good because there aren't a lot of other people shooting that kind of thing."

Colin Allerton, director of business development at Adult Empire told me over the phone, "With the tube sites, when you're looking for a large selection of the niche stuff it quickly disappears. Most of them focus on the most popular items, and a lot of people aren't just into the most popular items. So the niche world has definitely been where a lot of the continued pay-for-your-porn success has happened."

Allerton explained that the company has seen huge increases in the demand for incest scenes, and scenes including a stepmother or stepfather. He said, "The consumer is always looking for that kind of taboo… They may watch something that they would never do themselves, but it being taboo makes it more attractive to them, because it's not their everyday, normal life."

5. Production companies are treating their fans better than ever.

A little personalization can go a long way. Loula, the online marketing manager for Girlsway.com, told me via email, "There is constant engagement with our members in terms of how to better their experience on the site." She explained that the company encourages users to submit their "ultimate sexual fantasies" for the studio to bring to life.

She also noted that "humanizing the product" helps reinforce the message that behind the scenes exist real, tangible people. She asserts that members aren't only getting what they pay for, but also "supporting the people creating it and allowing them to create more."

Angie Rowntree told me, "I want to do really special things for my members. I want to produce great movies with great storylines and great actors. And it's not going to happen if we're not making money. Sssh's movies are based on the desires and the fantasies of our members. We're actually engaging our members. We talk to them. We have a survey. And this has been going on for 16 years. So we know what they want. They ask us. And that's what we shoot. They're not going to find that on the tube sites."

6. (Some) old dogs don't want to learn new tricks.

There is one demographic that hasn't been so affected by the rise of free porn:

older people. Allerton explained that their mail order catalog is still going strong. “People are still actually sending us money orders and checks as well as a lot of cash in the mail,” he said with a laugh, adding, “In 2015 you wouldn’t think that’s the case. But there’s a huge demographic, that likes to buy their adult materials out of mail order catalog.” When asked where most of these requests are coming from, he answered, “The Bible belt, actually.”

When asked what the typical consumer looks like, he told me, “We do know that it’s, in general, an older demographic for sure. That’s how they’ve always ordered their adult materials and it’s the way they’re going to keep doing so.”

He added, “We get plenty of notices from spouses wanting to return something saying, ‘Hey my husband has passed away. He always used to order from your catalog. The newest order has arrived, but he’s no longer here.’ So yeah, we definitely know it’s for sure an older demographic that’s buying out the mail order catalogs.”

Though, this trend may be specific to the men in this area.

7. People are becoming a lot less tolerant of viruses.

It’s not exactly a proud moment when you have to take your computer in after getting hit with a porn-related virus. Luckily, some solutions are starting to surface.

More recently, Colin and Angie Rowntree launched Boodigo.com, a “safe” porn search engine that doesn’t store user information or promote piracy. As it states on the official site, “Boodigo is designed to return accurate adult entertainment search results for our customers in a secure, private and anonymous environment. Boodigo does not use cookies or other user-tracking technologies to gather information about our users.”

Of course, safer search engines aren’t the only way to combat computer viruses.

Allerton explained, “There’s a ton of consumers who don’t want the stream porn to their home computer or their phone, so DVDs and Blue Ray are still selling quite a bit.”

When asked if a “Porn Netflix” seemed like a good idea, he told me, “We kind of do have the ‘adult Netflix of porn.’ There are new titles every day of the week, and that’s another way we have kind of combated the tube sites.”

“It’s an enormous selection, and the selection we have is well-organized; customers don’t need to worry about getting viruses and things of that nature that are going to ruin their computer or their phone — that’s a huge aspect that a lot of people have definitely mentioned in why they like to use us. They don’t want to get a virus and have their partner or their wife or whoever find out.”